

How many men of color served on April 19, and from which towns? Were they slaves or free men?

The best source for information on soldier of color who served during the Lexington and Concord alarm remains George Quintal's *Patriots of Color: "A Peculiar Beauty & Merit: "African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill*. Combining virtually all known primary source records as well as reliable supporting evidence from secondary works, Quintal's work offers a prosopographical analysis of black soldiers who served on April 19, 1775. This brief monograph draws extensively on the information provided in Quintal's study, supplemented with a small amount of data from other primary sources and from the seventeen-volume index to Massachusetts soldiers in the American Revolution, *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors of the Revolutionary War*. These materials provide the names of at least thirty-two men of color in actual service on April 19. Of these, nineteen can be documented as having been present during the fighting.¹

The soldiers of color who served on April 19 included a mix of enslaved and free men. Eleven men of color served in minute companies and records indicate that most of these men were free. Of those eleven, Jeffery Hemenway and Peter Salem served in Captain Simon Edgell's Framingham company and were involved in the fighting during the British retreat from Concord. Peter Ayres, Fortune Burnee, John Chowen, Titus Coburn, and Prince Johonnot marched with Middlesex, Essex, and Worcester county companies that received the alarm on April 19 but arrived too late to participate in the fighting. All of these men went on to serve in the Massachusetts Army in 1775 and were present at Bunker Hill, where Prince Johonnot was wounded.²

Also on April 19, Luther Jotham and Elias Sewell, free men of color from Bridgewater, marched to Marshfield with Captain Josiah Hayden's minute company to attack the British detachment stationed there. Owing to lack of experience and organization, the small company of regulars managed to escape before the colonial forces could mount an assault. Both Luther and Elias enlisted in the Massachusetts Army in 1775 and served in Roxbury.³

Finally, Caesar Dickinson of Deerfield and Nathaniel Dickinson of Whately marched with Hampshire county minute companies that received news of the fighting on April 20, 1775 and subsequently marched to Cambridge to join the colonial forces stationed there. Caesar may have been one of the few enslaved men to serve in a minute company. Court and marriage records from before and after April 19 indicate that Caesar was an enslaved man owned by the Dickinson

¹ George Quintal, jr., *Patriots of Color: "A Peculiar Beauty & Merit: "African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill* (Boston: Government Printing Office, 2004) and *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailor of the Revolutionary War*, 17 vols., (Boston: Wright & Potter Printers, 1904). See attached appendix for a full list of soldiers' names.

² See entries for Ayres, Burnee, Chowen, Coburn, Hemenway, Johonnot, and Salem in Quintal, et al.

³ For Jotham and Sewell, see *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 8, p. 1008 and v. 13, p. 1002. Neither soldier appears in *Patriots of Color*, but since neither fought on April 19 or at Bunker Hill, they are outside the scope of that work. For the failed attack on Marshfield, see Justin Winsor, *History of the Town of Duxbury, Massachusetts, with Genealogical Registers* (Boston: Crosby & Nichols, 1849), pp. 126-131 and Allen French, *The First Year of the American Revolution* (Octagon Books, 1968), pp. 28-30.

family in Hampshire County. After arriving at the army's encampment in Cambridge, Caesar enlisted in Colonel William Prescott's regiment and may have been present at the battle of Bunker Hill.⁴

At least twenty-three men of color served in colonial militia companies on April 19. Eighteen can be documented in primary or secondary sources as having been present during the fighting on April 19, including Prince Estabrook and cousins Eli and Silas Burdoo of Lexington. Prince Estabrook joined Captain John Parker's militia company on Lexington Green and was wounded by fire from the British soldiers. Five other men of color marched in companies that received the alarm on April 19 but arrived too late to participate in the fighting. At least four of these men subsequently enlisted in the Massachusetts Army and served at Bunker Hill and one, Caesar Bason, was killed there during the battle on June 17.⁵

The existing data are insufficient to determine precisely how many men of color were enslaved when they responded to the alarm occasioned by the events of April 19. The legal status of some soldiers is clear in the primary records. The man listed as "Squire Gardner's Adam" on the pay roll for Thomas White's Brookline company certainly describes an enslaved man of color. And in October 1775, William Whittemore signed for wages on behalf of his "servant," Cuff, who had been in service since the nineteenth. But it is less clear in other cases. A nineteenth-century source claims that Caesar Bason was "perhaps the servant of James Burn" of Westford but offers little to substantiate this claim.⁶

The available evidence also suggests that enslaved men of color are under-represented in the extant materials. Out of sixteen men known or believed to have been enslaved on April 19, only nine are listed on rolls authorizing payment for service that day. Of those, five appear on the rolls for just two companies. The pay roll for Captain Thomas White's Brookline company describes three men of color as slaves. All three marched alongside the men who owned them: Peter with Joshua Boylston, Adam with Squire Isaac Gardner, and Peter with Samuel White. Similarly, Captain Samuel Thatcher's Cambridge company includes two soldiers, Cato Boardman and Cato Stedman, who in all likelihood were enslaved men. That a significant portion of the known enslaved men of color appear in these two companies indicates that their inclusion may have been the particular choice of the clerks who drew up the rolls.⁷

⁴ For Caesar Dickinson or Bailey, see Quintal, 58. For Nathaniel Dickinson, see *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 4, p. 751.

⁵ For Prince Estabrook, see Quintal, pp. 97-100, Alice B. Hinkle, *Prince Estabrook: Slave & Soldier* (Pleasant Mountain Press, 2001) and the famous broadside *Bloody Butchery, by the British Troops: or, the Runaway Fight of the Regulars*, published by Ezekiel Russell, Salem, 1775. For the Burdoo cousins, see Quintal, pp. 69-76 and various entries for Burdoo/Burdeau in *Lexington, Mass. Records of Births, Marriages and Deaths to January 1, 1898* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1898).

⁶ For Adam [Gardner], see *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 1, p. 31 and Quintal, p. 110. For Caesar Bason, see Quintal, p. 60 and Rev. Edwin R. Hodgman, *History of the Town of Westford, in the County of Middlesex, Massachusetts, 1659-1883* (Lowell, MA: Morning Mail, 1883), p. 113.

⁷ For Thomas White's company, see *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 1, p. 31; v. 12 p. 238, 788. For Captain Samuel Thatcher's company, see the company pay roll in v. 13, p. 143, *Muster Rolls of the Revolutionary War* (SC1/Series 57X), Massachusetts Archives. Cambridge vital records indicate both the Stedmans and the Boardmans owned slaves. See *Vital Records of Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston, 1914), v. 2, pp. 442, 805.

Accordingly, additional information concerning the service of men of color on April 19 must be drawn from other sources. For example, a list of prisoners exchanged in June 1775 includes Caesar Augustus, “a negro servant to Mr. Tileston, of Dorchester,” amongst those captured during the fighting on April 19. And although no pay roll exists for Captain Benjamin Locke’s Charlestown company, local records indicate that two enslaved men, Cato Wood and Cuff Whittemore, served with the town’s militia during the battle. Similarly, local history in the town of Bedford indicates that Caesar Jones and Cambridge Moore, enslaved men owned by local officers, marched with the town’s militia and minute companies on April 19. Neither Caesar nor Cambridge are listed on the extant pay rolls for either company. Finally, local legends maintain that nine-year-old Abel Benson alarmed the Framingham militia with a trumpet on the morning of the nineteenth.⁸

It would not be a surprise, then, to learn that other officers or local leaders serving on April 19 were accompanied by enslaved men of color who do not appear in subsequent primary source records. One possible scenario involves Caesar Robbins, whose descendants built the house that now stands near the North Bridge within Minute Man National Park. Caesar, whose origins trace back to a 1762 record indicating he was an enslaved man owned by “John Robbins” of Chelmsford, may have been owned by Israel Heald of Acton at the time of the Revolution. On April 19, Heald served as the lieutenant in Captain Joseph Robbins’s militia company that fought at the North Bridge. It is possible that Caesar served alongside him.⁹

Given these gaps in the historical record, a conservative estimate of as many as fifty men of color serving with colonial forces on April 19, 1775 seems reasonable.

⁸ For Caesar Augustus, see *Essex Gazette*, June 6, 1775, and Quintal, p. 55. For Wood and Whittemore, see Samuel Smith, *West Cambridge on the Nineteenth of April, 1775: An Address Delivered in Behalf of the Ladies’ Soldiers’ Aid Society of West Cambridge* (Arlington: A Mudge, 1864), pp. 60-62 and Quintal, pp. 218, 224. For Jones and Moore, see Quintal, pp. 144, 160. For Abel Benson, see David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere’s Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 147. Although local legends such as these cannot always be taken at face value, corroborating primary source evidence seems to indicate some degree of veracity in these stories. John Moore is listed as a slave owner in the 1771 tax valuation for Bedford. Timothy Jones is not, perhaps lending credence to the tale that by the time of the Revolution, Caesar Jones had been emancipated but still remained indentured to his former owner. See Bettye Pruitt, *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* (Boston: GK Hall, 1978). Abel Benson’s grandfather, Nero Benson, served as a trumpeter in Captain Isaac Clarke’s troop of horse when the Framingham militia was called into service during the war against the Abenaki in 1725. The musical tradition may have carried through the family. See Muster Roll of Isaac Clarke’s Troop, Aug. 27-Sept. 18, 1725, v. 91, p. 150, *Massachusetts Archives Collection* (SC1/Series 45X), Massachusetts Archives.

⁹ Israel Heald married John Robbins’s daughter Susannah on December 30, 1762. See *Vital Records of Acton, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1923), p. 180. Caesar Robbins first appears in extant military rolls as a soldier in the Acton militia company that marched to assist in the fortification of Dorchester Heights in March 1776. At that time, Israel Heald had been promoted to captain in command of the Acton militia. See *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 13, p. 373.